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Public-Private Partnership Developed To Protect Rare Turtle *State Department of Fish and Game teams with US Fish and Wildlife Service and Bristol-Myers Squibb Co. to protect Blanding's turtles*

BOSTON – Efforts by state and federal wildlife agencies to restore the Commonwealth's population of rare Blanding's turtles got a boost this spring when employees of Bristol-Myers Squibb volunteered to repair fencing along a two-mile stretch of busy roadway in the midst of the species' habitat. The fence project was part of a growing partnership between Bristol Myers-Squibb Co. and wildlife agencies to protect and restore Blandings' turtles, listed as "threatened" under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act.

"When private companies step up to the plate, as Bristol-Myers Squibb has done, the Commonwealth's limited resources for rare species conservation go much farther," Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Ian Bowles said. "Through this cooperative project with state and federal agencies, Bristol-Myers Squibb and its employees are showing leadership and foresight. We thank them for their commitment and look forward to continuing this fruitful partnership in the months ahead."

Native to areas of eastern and central Massachusetts, Blanding's turtles are imperiled by roads and vehicles across their range. The turtles typically travel to several wetlands throughout a single year – including migration by females to nesting sites, crossing roads in the process. Devens project partners will work together to increase and enhance nesting habitat to encourage females to nest in large, unfragmented areas away from roads.

"This is an innovative public-private partnership that will involve hands-on restoration efforts and education of the public concerning the need for more turtle conservation measures," said Mary Griffin, DFG Commissioner. "We greatly appreciate the commitment of Bristol-Myers Squibb and its employees to protect the Blanding's turtle and improve the species' chances for long-term survival in Massachusetts."

As part of its early commitment to Blanding's turtle restoration, Bristol-Myers Squibb also sponsored an educational Earth Day celebration at its Massachusetts offices in Devens. The DFG's Division of Fisheries and Wildlife and the Department of Environmental Protection - as well as the US Fish and Wildlife Service and numerous environmentally-focused companies - displayed educational materials at the event, which drew attendance by more than 60 Bristol-Myers Squibb employees.

Bristol-Myers Squibb broke ground in early 2007 on an 89-acre biologics manufacturing campus. The Devens site currently has 130 employees, and expects to employ over 300 when the facility opens in late 2009. This division of the global company will initially focus on the development of compounds used to make Orencia, a treatment for rheumatoid arthritis. In the future, the division will expand activities to include a number of biological pharmaceutical products in the research and development stage or in clinical trials.

In addition to roadways and vehicles, other threats to the survival of Blanding's and other turtle species in Massachusetts include habitat loss and degradation due to development, illegal collection, and agricultural and forestry practices. Also, in suburban areas, trash and pet food left outside provide supplemental food sources for turtle predators such as raccoons and skunks, allowing them to reach higher densities than they normally would in rural areas and inflating predation rates on turtle eggs and hatchlings.

Essential to the protection of the Blanding's turtle are the creation and improvement of wildlife corridors, protection of nesting habitat, and public education about the species' conservation needs. Blanding's turtles are particularly vulnerable because they travel long distances during their active season, do not reproduce until late in life (14-20 years), and have low nest survival. These traits make them sensitive to even a 1 to 2 percent increase in adult mortality.

In May, Bristol-Myers Squibb worked with their partners to create a new nesting habitat for Blanding's turtles in Devens. A volunteer group removed pieces of trees and brush and hand-pulled two invasive plant species in the nesting area. For more information about the partnership, turtle conservation in general, and Blanding's turtles, see the following links from the Massachusetts DFG and its Division of Fisheries and Wildlife:

<http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/blandingsturtle.htm>

http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/nhosp/conservation/herps/turtle_tips.htm

http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/nhosp/species_info/nhfacts/emyoidea_blandingii.pdf

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